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Fifth Committee

Summary record of the 4th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 13 October 2003, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Kmoníček ..... (Czech Republic)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

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03-55430 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 124: Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (*continued*) (A/C.5/58/L.2)

Draft resolution A/C.5/58/L.2

1. **Ms. Fogh** (Sweden) introduced draft resolution A/C.5/58/L.2 on behalf of the Chairman.

2. **Mr. Farid** (Saudi Arabia) drew attention to an omission in the Arabic version of the draft resolution.

3. **The Chairman** said that the Secretariat had taken note of the problem and would make the necessary correction.

4. *Draft resolution A/C.5/58/L.2 was adopted.*

5. **Mr. Tankoano** (Niger) thanked the Committee for supporting his delegation's request for exemption under Article 19 of the Charter.

6. **Mr. Elji** (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking on behalf of the Group of Arab States, said that he wished to underscore that, in accordance with the understanding reached in informal consultations, the inclusion in paragraph 3 of the draft resolution of the phrase "noting the observations in paragraphs 82 and 90 of the appendix to document A/C.5/57/39" did not imply acceptance of those observations. Concerning paragraph 82 of the aforementioned document, he said that the decision by the Committee on Contributions to review any future requests from the Comoros for exemption under Article 19 in the light of its payment record was not in conformity with the Committee's legislative mandate. The economic, social and other crises facing the Comoros, which had not benefited from the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Debt Initiative, would prevent it from paying the full minimum amount necessary to avoid the application of Article 19. Lastly, he reaffirmed the commitment of the Arab States to pay their assessed contributions in full, on time and without conditions.

7. **Mr. Poukré-Kono** (Central African Republic) thanked the members of the Committee who had supported his delegation's request for exemption under Article 19. His Government would strive to respect the payment schedule established.

Agenda item 125: Pattern of conferences (A/57/783 and A/57/809; A/58/7 and Corr.1 and Add.1, A/58/32, A/58/194 and Corr.1 and Corr.2 and A/58/213)

8. **Mr. Tal** (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences) said that the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2003 (A/58/32) covered its work since the 2002 substantive session and included specific recommendations to the General Assembly and guidelines for the Secretariat. The Committee on Conferences had adopted all of the report's conclusions and recommendations by consensus. Following the practice which the Secretary-General had begun in 2002, it had chosen to submit two consolidated reports rather than several separate reports, making its consideration of the issues involved more cohesive.

9. The Committee on Conferences had decided to recommend, through the Fifth Committee, a draft resolution for adoption by the Assembly. The draft resolution, contained in annex I to the report, reflected the discussions that had taken place during its substantive session, and it hoped that the draft resolution would make its advice to the General Assembly more relevant.

10. Observers had taken part in the work of the Committee on Conferences in increasing numbers in the previous three years, indicating greater awareness of its relevance. Delegations interested in becoming involved, particularly in drafting activities, had been urged to seek full membership through their regional groups.

11. The Committee on Conferences had considered biennializing the item entitled "Pattern of conferences" in the agenda of the General Assembly. While the idea had gathered some support, the wide-ranging reform under way in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management meant that it was too early to take a decision on the matter.

12. Under the draft resolution, the General Assembly would approve the draft biennial calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2004-2005 and authorize the Committee on Conferences to make any adjustments necessitated by actions or decisions of the Assembly at its fifty-eighth session.

13. The draft resolution also referred to the utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities. The Committee on Conferences had noted

that the overall utilization rate for such services at the Organization's four duty stations, 75 per cent in 2002, had shown a slight improvement, but that that figure was 5 per cent below the benchmark established by the General Assembly and caused an unacceptable loss of resources. As Chairman of the Committee, he had consulted with the chairpersons and secretaries of bodies which had underutilized their allotted resources for three consecutive years to urge them to make appropriate changes in their working methods. Some of those bodies had argued that more account should be taken of the informal consultations which followed their formal meetings. The Committee on Conferences had emphasized that the Organization must accommodate the needs of each body, while not being too lenient, and that planning accuracy should be taken into account.

14. In considering the provision of conference services to regional and other major groupings, the Committee on Conferences had noted that, while 98 per cent of meetings had received conference services in 2001-2002, the figure had decreased to 92 per cent in 2002-2003. Providing services for such groups facilitated the work of the Main Committees of the General Assembly and other United Nations bodies, but the Committee on Conferences had not been able to consider the matter further without the report of the Secretary-General on the cost implications of providing more predictable and adequate conference services to the meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, which had since been issued (A/58/397).

15. With regard to the use of conference facilities and services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Committee on Conferences had expressed concern that resources still appeared to be inadequate. Further reporting on the improvement and modernization of the facilities there would take place through the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ). The Committee on Conferences had noted the improvements at the conference centre of the Economic Commission for Africa, which had resulted in an 80 per cent increase in occupancy in 2002 compared with 2001.

16. With regard to the reform for the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management, the Committee on Conferences had considered the report of the Secretary-General (A/57/289) in detail and had stressed that reform should be aimed at improving the timely delivery of documentation and the quality of conference services. It had asked to be kept informed of the results of the planned study on the integrated global management of conference-related resources.

17. It had welcomed the move towards consolidated and more focused reports, and had requested information from the Secretary-General on page-limit compliance for documents not originating within the Secretariat. The Committee on Conferences had noted that a comprehensive review of workload standards and performance measurement had been planned and requested a thorough cost-benefit analysis of the current approach to summary records and a review of the list of bodies entitled to them. It had recognized the importance of user satisfaction in conference management, and urged a broadening of that approach. It had asked the Secretary-General to provide assistance to Member States in the electronic submission and retrieval of documents where required and to maintain the principle of concordance for all resolutions.

18. With regard to documentation- and publication-related matters, the Committee on Conferences had not considered 2003 to be the best time to consider such issues in detail, but it had requested that the rules on the simultaneous distribution of documents in all the official languages should be respected in the Official Document System (ODS) and on the Organization's web site, and that documentation should be made available in all the official languages in accordance with the six-week rule. It had welcomed the progress made in integrating information technology into management and document-processing systems, and urged that such actions should be taken for all duty stations, especially Nairobi.

19. The Committee had been pleased with the reduction in requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243, and recommended that the General Assembly should explicitly authorize four bodies to meet in New York during the main part of the fifty-eighth session.

20. He hoped that the Fifth Committee would adopt the draft resolution without the need to re-open the debate.

21. **Mr. Chen** Jian (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on reform of the Department for General Assembly and

Conference Management (A/58/213), welcomed the innovative approach of the Committee on Conferences, which had proposed elements of a draft resolution on pattern of conferences in its annual report (A/58/32); that initiative should facilitate the work of the Fifth Committee. The reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management was aimed at improving the quality, timeliness and cost-effectiveness of the Department's performance. Unlike previous reforms, the current endeavour was clearly targeted, results-oriented and time-bound. The Department was focused not just on making organizational changes, but on achieving synergy. The incremental approach it had adopted, while perhaps not the most desirable, was certainly the most practical one.

22. He was pleased to report that the Department had made progress in most areas, without its normal operations being affected. The proactive forward planning of the technical secretariats of the General Assembly and the Main Committees had contributed to the smooth and effective conduct of the work of the intergovernmental bodies. For example, the early availability of the draft programme of work for the plenary of the fifty-eighth session of the Assembly had facilitated preparations by Member States and would be critical to the success of the slotting system for the submission of documents.

23. Steps had been taken to improve the quality of the Department's performance, particularly the linguistic quality of its output, through, inter alia, training and internal quality control. The Department's exchanges with Member States on the use of the six official languages had produced constructive feedback.

24. In the area of documents management, the slotting system had led to an initial improvement in the timeliness of submission of documents by author entities; that would result in more timely issuance of documents by the Secretariat. There had also been gains in compliance with the page limits for reports originating in the Secretariat. As to conference management, greater predictability and stricter adherence to the calendar of conferences and meetings had led to more rational planning and more cost-effective delivery of services.

25. Information technology was now playing a much more prominent role as a strategic tool: an electronic version of the *Journal of the United Nations* provided access to meeting information and documents; e-Meets was up and running and would soon be expanded to include information from other duty stations and provide services to other Secretariat departments and Member States; the e-Conveyor system had been designed and tested and a prototype was expected to be operational by year-end.

26. Most significantly, the Department had been able to achieve a sound budgetary position through more cost-effective provision of meetings and documentation services to the intergovernmental bodies and reductions in overexpenditure in such areas as temporary assistance for meetings and overtime. In order to tackle overexpenditure beyond its control, the Department would work with the other parties concerned.

27. As a first step towards its ultimate goal of electronic processing of documentation, the Department had introduced e-flow, a system for the electronic transmission of documents. A first batch of printing-on-demand equipment had been installed as part of a mix of traditional and modern technology that would respond to varying needs in the most cost-effective manner. The pilot project involving the completion of the concordance of draft resolutions prior to their adoption by the General Assembly was to be expanded during the fifty-eighth session to cover not only the First Committee but also the Fourth and Sixth Committees. While it would be desirable to extend the practice to all resolutions, as the Committee on Conferences had recommended, that would require changes in the working methods and programmes of work of the plenary and the other Main Committees. The Department would work with Member States to find a solution.

28. The Department intended to build on its successes thus far by launching new projects. It had begun a comprehensive study on the integrated global management of conference-related resources covering Headquarters in New York and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna, and Nairobi. The project, which would be implemented in collaboration with the Office of Internal Oversight Services, would focus on developing clear guidelines, devising a practical approach and recommending an operating model for the central monitoring and coordination mechanisms.

29. The Department had also set up a task force to conduct a comprehensive review of the current workload standards for language staff. Performance measurement would be an important subject of the

review. The paramount concern would be to enhance the quality of the Department's outputs. In that connection, he noted that supplementary information on the staffing levels and productivity of two divisions of the Department had been distributed to delegations at the request of one Member State. The statistics provided, however, were based on traditional methods of calculation and were not therefore an accurate measure of the performance of the staff concerned.

30. Efforts were already under way to consolidate reports on related subjects and enforce the limits on the length of reports originating in the Secretariat. In addition, task forces would be set up to address the issue of reports that were not within the purview of the Secretary-General and to propose solutions.

31. While the past year had been difficult, the Department was now moving in the right direction. Its achievements had been due in no small part to the encouragement and guidance received from Member States and, in particular, from the Fifth Committee and he looked forward to benefiting further from the expertise and insight of its members.

32. **Mr. Mselle** (Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions) introduced the related report of ACABQ (A/58/7/Add.1). The Advisory Committee's first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 (A/58/7 and Corr.1), which also dealt with matters related to the pattern of conferences, particularly in paragraphs I.30 to I.87 and II.2, would be introduced subsequently, in the debate on the proposed programme budget. In its second report (A/58/7/Add.1), the Advisory Committee recommended, in paragraph 3, the approval of the amount of $1,427,000 requested in the proposed programme budget for renovation and modernization of the conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. Any further such requests would be treated in accordance with the procedures outlined in the Advisory Committee's report on building construction procedures (A/36/643).

33. In the fourth line of paragraph 4 of the report, in which the Advisory Committee referred to the concept of "integrated global management of the Department", the words "the Department" should be replaced by "conference-related resources". The Advisory Committee strongly believed that an interactive capability among the various systems used by the duty stations to track conference-servicing capacity was an essential prerequisite for global management.

34. **Mr. Martini** (Italy), speaking on behalf of the European Union, the acceding countries Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, the associated countries Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, and, in addition, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, said he welcomed the draft resolution which the Committee on Conferences proposed for adoption by the Fifth Committee, noting that it was the first time that it had done so. The European Union attached great importance to the quality and efficiency of conference services, which affected the ability of the intergovernmental bodies to work smoothly. Linguistic diversity must be respected when organizing conferences.

35. Underutilization of conference services by a number of bodies was causing concern, as it wasted resources. The European Union valued the steps taken by the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences to improve the situation, and supported the proposal for consultations between the Secretariat and the chairmen of the bodies concerned.

36. Implementation of the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management approved by resolution 57/383 B was a positive step. As the Committee on Conferences had pointed out, the reform should improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of conference services, including translation, interpretation and editing, provided to Member States. Documents should be made available in advance of their consideration by intergovernmental bodies. The ban on night and weekend meetings had improved the organization of work and had reduced costs; it should be strictly applied. That policy could serve as an example for improvements elsewhere. In that connection, the Committee on Conferences should enforce respect for the calendar of conferences and the time allotted to intergovernmental bodies.

37. The European Union supported the proposal for a comprehensive study on the integrated global management of conference-related resources, to be conducted in collaboration with the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), and called for close cooperation among duty stations, with respect for their operational independence, to promote synergy and disseminate service standards. It also backed the

proposals of the Secretary-General to provide public access to the Official Document System (ODS) and to embark on a study of workload standards and performance measurements.

38. **Ms. Ebbesen** (United States of America) said that her delegation welcomed the reports of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/58/194 and Corr.1 and Corr.2) and on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/58/213), and endorsed most of the conclusions and recommendations in the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2003 (A/58/32). It regarded the report of the Secretary-General on reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management as a positive sign for the future of conference servicing and as the first phase in what it expected would be a process of continuing improvements. It hoped that the Member States would give careful consideration to the draft resolution of the Committee on Conferences, in order to avoid a protracted debate, since the Fifth Committee had a very full agenda. Her delegation was in favour of biennializing the item entitled "Pattern of conferences", as had been done with human resources and the budget, in order to promote better working practices in the Fifth Committee and to allocate appropriate time to that important topic.

39. As a strong and consistent supporter of United Nations reform, her delegation supported the proposals of the Secretary-General regarding the United Nations Repertory of Practice and the secretariats of the Fifth and Sixth Committees. Those measures would increase efficiency and promote the kind of priority-setting which the Organization needed.

40. The steps taken to reduce the documentation backlog through upstream planning, a slotting system, electronic document processing and the strict enforcement of page limits were a major step in the right direction. The Department should continue its improvements. That was particularly important in the area of summary records; her delegation supported the wording in the draft resolution proposed by the Committee on Conferences, which called on the Secretary-General to make a cost-benefit analysis of the current approach to summary records, to review the list of bodies entitled to them, to assess their relevance and to provide effective and financially sound alternatives. It also supported the efforts of the Department to conduct a comprehensive study of global management, with the full and equal participation of all duty stations and of the Office of Internal Oversight Services. It appreciated the online version of the *Journal of the United Nations* with its hyperlinks to documents and had been reviewing its own use and distribution of hard-copy documentation with a view to reducing waste by using the available online resources, especially the Official Document System (ODS). It wished to encourage other Missions to do the same.

41. The underutilization of conference services was a matter of concern, as the Committee on Conferences had pointed out. The resulting loss of resources could be avoided if the chairmen of the various committees planned appropriately and communicated closely with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. Again, the draft resolution proposed appropriate action by the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences.

42. Her delegation was strongly in favour of maintaining the existing policy of providing conference services to regional and other major groupings on an ad hoc basis that had proven successful in the past and could continue to be successful if the groups concerned communicated their needs to the Department early and clearly. The Department accounted for 16 per cent of the Organization's budget and had made serious and successful efforts to avoid repeating the overruns which had occurred between 1999 and 2001. Providing regular budget funding for regional and other groups which met erratically and as necessary would weaken the Department's strong budgetary position. Perhaps more importantly, only the expenses of the Organization should be borne by its Member States.

43. Her delegation dissociated itself from the consensus regarding the calendar of conferences for 2004-2005. Since it did not support providing conference services for the Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, by extension it could not agree to allow that Committee an exception to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243 to enable it to meet during the main part of the fifty-eighth session.

44. **Ms. Taylor Roberts** (Jamaica) said that her delegation was pleased with the efforts of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to carry out the reforms outlined by the Secretary-General in his report (A/57/289), particularly

in the area of the production and distribution of documentation, and agreed with the time limits set for further reform.

45. It appreciated the conference services which the Department provided for regional groups and had noted improvements in those services. It hoped that earlier notification of needs would result in continued improvements. One of the elements of the reform process was the supply of documents using a printing-on-demand approach. Her delegation hoped that that policy would be applied carefully so that it did not affect the right of Member States to receive the parliamentary documentation required for their work at the United Nations.

46. While it strongly supported the principles of multilingualism and adherence to the resolutions and instructions regarding the posting of documents on the Official Document System (ODS) in all the official languages, her delegation hoped that there would not be complete inflexibility in interpreting them, since that could be counterproductive and harm the work of smaller working groups and committees whose members had agreed on other linguistic arrangements.

The meeting rose at 11.05 a.m.